

# A Buddhist Voice in the Demythologizing Debate

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FOR SOME TIME now, a certain problem has been causing quite a stir in the Protestant intellectual world of Europe and America and has become the subject of a heated debate involving not only theologians and church members but also philosophical circles and the general public. This problem concerns the idea of “demythologizing” which Rudolf Bultmann proposed originally in connection with New Testament hermeneutics.

The New Testament is conditioned by the age in which it was written and includes a great deal of the mythological imagery underlying the ancient world. For the modern man and woman living and thinking in an age conditioned by the scientific view of the world, this imagery poses a considerable stumbling block. To remove the obstacle, modern theology needs to dismantle this mythical imagery and extract its immutable core. Bultmann has tried to effect this demythologizing in New Testament exegesis with the aid of Heidegger’s existential philosophy. Heidegger sees human life as *Existenz* and employs an “existentialist” method of interpretation to clarify the meaning of human existence in its timeliness and fitness from the standpoint of fundamental ontology.

This is not to say that Bultmann’s views can be reduced to Heideggerian philosophy. For Bultmann, without God we live in “corruption” and meaninglessness. It is only in the awareness of one’s insignificance that one is open to the activity of God. Furthermore, in so far as divine revelation in Christ demands a decision of the individual,

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it is also a call. Only by following this call through faith can one be saved. This is much the same as Luther's statement, "justification before God through faith alone." Thus we may say that Bultmann's aim is to demythologize with the help of existentialist interpretation, and to open up a horizon wherein modern men and women can once again have access to the faith of the Reformers. As Bultmann puts it:

The myth must be studied or interpreted by asking the question: which understanding of human being, of human existence, is expressed in the myth? This is what I call the existentialist interpretation: Which understanding of human existence, even after the disappearance or destruction of the mythical concepts, is still a permanent and relevant possibility for understanding human existence? The problem of demythologizing is a problem of hermeneutics, a problem of interpretation, and the principle of interpretation is inquiry into the understanding of existence contained in myth in general, and what is of special interest to us, in the mythological statements of the New Testament (*Die christliche Hoffnung und das Problem der Entmythologisierung*, p. 50).

There is a wide variety of opinion on this approach, which has produced a vast body of literature. I shall not go into that matter here, but shall restrict myself to two or three basic issues related to the problem of demythologizing.

The problem of demythologizing did not originate with Bultmann. Throughout the history of Christianity, it has always been present, if only in latent form. In a sense, it was present from the very beginning of Christianity. Bultmann, like other scholars, has admitted this on more than one occasion. Long before the emergence of Christianity from the midst of a "heathen" world, attempts have been made to emancipate people from mythological ideas and the mythological view of the world. With the Greeks this attempt was part of the newly awakened "reason" in scientific-philosophical thought. But the more that Christianity deepened its contacts with the heathen world, the more a complicated conflict grew up between faith laden with myth and reason stripping away this myth to awaken to selfhood. The long

history of the Christian Church and theology is basically the history of this conflict.

In the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the natural sciences produced a new world view, emancipated both from religion and metaphysics. With the emergence of an empirical and positivistic understanding of society, history, and the human person, this conflict took on an especially profound and intense form. A method of thinking that rightly deserves to be called a carefully constructed demythologizing spread throughout the world of learning, except for religion. It was not a matter of hermeneutics, as in the case of Bultmann, but of real life.

The Christian Church and Christian theology assumed a basically defensive position against this current, viewing it as a risk to the very survival of the faith. Of course, in Schleiermacher and other liberal theologians, one finds a vigorous attempt to carry out a reconstruction of dogma that would take into account the new intellectual climate, but their efforts did not even come close to the total demythologizing of real life that was about to be achieved in the profane world outside. At the same time, such attempts were bound to lead away from the path opened up by the reformers and to appear more and more as a danger to the faith.

In the world of theology, therefore, demythologizing has always been unavoidable, but beyond a certain threshold provokes a crisis of faith and a fear that the foundations are crumbling. Each new attempt at demythologizing provokes a reaction that blocks its progress. This seems to be the dilemma that has plagued Christian theology until the present day. Of course, Christian theology has not always been fully aware of the nature of the dilemma, and in a sense, is afraid to face it.

This is the background against which Bultmann's approach must be seen. There is no way, as far as I can see, for Bultmann to deviate from the way liberal theology formulates the question, since he always comes back to reformulating the basic concerns of liberal theology. In challenging the mythological concepts that continue to dominate present day theology, he hopes to revive the dreams of the reformers, in direct contrast to liberal theology.

It is not hard to understand why Bultmann's novel approach was enthusiastically embraced by many theologians, especially those of the

younger generation, as a way to satisfy their own hidden needs. Meanwhile, his approach has come under violent attack by many contemporaries for striking at the roots of the faith and forcing theology into a crisis of survival. This is not at all surprising when we recall that Bultmann derives his approach from Heideggerian existentialist hermeneutics.

While this problem has lain hidden deep under the surface of Christianity from the beginning, it has not been an issue for Buddhism. In fact, the very posture of the problem that lifts Buddhism up and away from the problem by opening up a completely new religious horizon actually draws a line that distinguishes Buddhism from all other religions. At the same time, the vitality which Christianity continues to exhibit draws its sustenance from the hidden menace this problem poses. In the face of the energetic and wide-reaching debate over demythologizing, Buddhism, in its present tepid and inactive state, always seems to be like a kind of geological relic from the past.

## II

The question of what myth is, i.e., the question of its content and scope of the notion of myth, consumes a great deal of time in the debate over demythologizing. For his part, Bultmann locates "the characteristic feature of the mythological concept" in the "making of the other-worldly into the this-worldly" (*Verdiesseitigung des Jenseitigen*). This definition has been criticized as too vague. Bultmann calls concepts based on an old world view mythic, but critics of this definition maintain that myth and world view are two different things. Their counterargument can be briefly summarized as follows. When a transcendental reality comes into contact with the spatial-temporal world, it can be represented only symbolically, with the aid of this-worldly objects. The inevitable result of this need to express the other-worldly reality is myth. This line of contention destroys the argument that myth is a stumbling block for a modern intellect permeated by the sciences. The problem is not that myth is founded on an old world view, but rather in the fact that the modern intellect itself is blind to the reality of the other world. The modern intellect has come under the spell of critical analysis, and we must therefore inquire into the limits

of scientific knowledge. This is the main thrust of the criticism leveled at Bultmann by theologians like Emil Brunner and philosophers like Karl Jaspers.

Other criticism of the ambiguity of Bultmann's notion of myth may also be briefly mentioned. See for example, the position of F. K. Schumann as found in the book cited above. Here, Schumann says that the gods of antiquity are at home in the same world with human beings, that they are therefore immanent in the world and are never something purely other-worldly for the human person. The God of the Old Testament, however, is other-worldly in respect to this world and to human beings. In speaking of what is this-worldly or other-worldly, however, one must always bear in mind that the imagery of the Bible is different from other kinds of imagery. For this reason, the general notion of myth that Bultmann uses to define the nature of mythological language and which gives expression to the other-worldly through the use of this-worldly concepts and images, proves to be unsatisfactory. In the Bible, every myth in the message coming to us from the transcendent is exploded and overcome. (Overcoming the myth therefore has nothing to do with the problem of world view; myth is not overcome through a world view!) It is just as impossible to speak as directly about coming, about salvation, and therefore about the beginning and end of the world as it is to speak about other things. In every case, the Christian message and Christian theology is forced to use mythological language, but the mythological terms must be used in such a way that the myth is overcome at the same time. The mythological imagery must be endowed with a new sense. These are the general lines of argumentation in the criticism against Bultmann.

If Bultmann's critics admit the inevitability of borrowing mythological concepts and likewise emphasize the necessity of overcoming these concepts, there would at first seem to be no real difference between their criticism and Bultmann's own standpoint. Bultmann, too, has no desire to simply retain the mythological concept, but wants to interpret it from the position of how faith understands human existence, and in this way expose the core meaning of the myth. However, closer examination reveals an essential difference between these two viewpoints, however similar they may appear at first. With all their emphasis on the need to overcome mythological imagery, Bultmann's

critics insist on retaining the use of mythological language as indispensable. In their view, the only way in which the purely other-worldly in the true sense of the word and its connection to the this-worldly can be described is through mythological language. This necessarily leads to the routine preservation of all mythological concepts related to the purely other-worldly that abound in the Bible. There is a certain conservatism behind the criticism here that shrouds the matter in still another sort of ambiguity.

Bultmann's critics maintain that the myth must be "overcome" and endowed with a "new meaning." Now what do they really mean here by "new meaning"? Must the new meaning be restated in mythological terms? If so, then all talk of overcoming the myth is meaningless. Or is it a question of bringing this "new meaning" to light without employing mythical terms? If that is the case, one can no longer insist on the need for mythical terms to describe the other-worldly. Bultmann himself has pointedly demonstrated the ambiguity of his critics: what in the world does it mean to say that the mythological language must be overcome and exploded in order to emancipate the new meaning contained in mythological imagery? As Bultmann concludes, "the new meaning cannot be restated in mythological language, for that would obviously be absurd; one would then have to demythologize again and again *ad infinitum*" (op. cit., p. 50). In Bultmann's opinion, the meaning of the myth must be expressed in a demythologized manner and the only method that can do this is the existentialist interpretation of the human person. Here we see what Bultmann really means by demythologizing. Bultmann's approach implies a subversion of conventional biblical exegesis. A fundamental gap exists between Bultmann's understanding of demythologizing and those who wish to maintain the positive indispensable significance of the myth under some form or another. When we consider this fundamental gap, the criticism of Bultmann's definition of myth as vague becomes merely secondary.

At any rate, the question of what parts of Christianity are mythological statements is clearly a central theme for Bultmann. Bultmann asks, for example, "But what of the resurrection? Is it not a mythical event pure and simple?" (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 38.) He later continues: "The resurrection itself is not an event of past history. All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection" (p. 42). Since the resurrection of Christ

is central to Christianity, it is not all difficult to imagine the significance of Bultmann's statements and the shock effect they have had.

But that is not all. In his debate with Bultmann, F. K. Schumann, maintains that mythological imagery is the only means of expression at our disposal. Schumann claims that when we call God "Father" and Christ "Son of God" we are employing a mythological manner of speaking. The talk of a "coming" God and an "acting" God comes from the vocabulary of mythological language, "because in its origins the expression 'God' is a mythological expression" (op. cit., p. 41). If the expression "God" itself is mythological, it goes without saying that we cannot help using mythological language. At the same time, Schumann claims that even while retaining the mythological expression "God," the Christian message and Christian theology explode it, overcome it and endow it with new meaning. But there is a fundamental ambiguity here, as Bultmann has also pointed out. What happens when the new meaning supposedly contained in the myth must be restated in mythological language? If "God" and "Son of God" are mythological expressions, how can the meaning of these terms be expressed in a new, demythologized manner? Is it possible to do so within the bounds of Christianity or at least within the limits of the Christian tradition as it has been handed down to the present? Or does it go beyond these limits and require an entirely new form of Christianity? This is a fundamental problem for Bultmann. In essence, however, it is also a problem latent in Christianity from the very beginning, a problem that is only just now coming to a head. We will therefore do well to briefly examine Bultmann's views in this regard.

### III

In his essay, "New Testament and Mythology," Bultmann writes:

We have now outlined a programme for the demythologizing of the New Testament. Are there still any surviving traces of mythology? There certainly are for those who regard all language about an act of God or of a decisive, eschatological event as mythological. But this is not mythology in the traditional sense, not the kind of mythology which has become antiquated with the decay of the mythical world view. For the



redemption of which we have spoken is not a miraculous supernatural event, but a historical event wrought out in time and space (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 43).

Replying to Bultmann in his own essay, Julius Schniewind takes issue with this statement. Schniewind emphasizes that any talk about God and sin in the fall of the human race must appear as a myth per se, not just to "the modern person." According to Schniewind, by not recognizing this and carrying it through consistently, Bultmann does not do justice to the formulation of the question (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 54). To this Bultmann responds:

. . . to speak of faith in the living God and in his presence in Christ is pure myth unless these things are given an existentialist (N.B., not "existential") interpretation. This explains why I deny that Christianity is intrinsically mythological. It would be true to say that natural man finds it to be pure *skandalon* precisely when it is made intellectually intelligible to him. The Christian preacher can demand faith only when he has demonstrated sin and grace to be real possibilities of human life, and their denial and repudiation to be unbelief and guilt. It is the great merit of the existentialist interpretation that it makes this clear (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 105).

We may conclude from this exchange that Bultmann does recognize and keep open the possibility of regarding the divine revelation in Christ as myth. Of course, Bultmann defines the reason why divine revelation is myth in a different way than it is defined in a conventional myth deriving from the old world view. For him, God's revelation, God's eschatological acting is myth insofar as it is not given an existentialist interpretation. Only in the existentialist interpretation of myth does God's eschatological acting become a genuine *skandalon* for the natural man or woman, that is, it besets a man or woman as a *skandalon* that can only be overcome through the decision of faith. For Bultmann the acting of God puts an end to the world as "this world." A man or woman comes into the picture as the "new man or woman." This in turn means that the acting of God makes human existence (Bultmann calls it "eschatological existence") possible (*Kerygma and Myth*, p. 32).



From this standpoint, confession of sin and faith in God's grace become "the possibility of my existence," while unbelief is nothing other than the rejection of this possibility. For the natural man or woman living in a "worldly" manner, this is something that can only be seen as a paradox and a *skandalon*. In short, unless talk about sin and God has the character of a genuine *skandalon* that places the natural man or woman at a fork in the road where they must choose between the possibility and the impossibility of his existence, it remains a simple myth.

But why does Bultmann use the expression "myth" here? If, as mentioned above, he does not use the expression in reference to the ancient world view, he perhaps uses it to indicate what he calls "making the other-worldly this worldly." But if that is the case, how does it relate to his contention that "the new meaning of myth cannot be restated in mythological language"? Can the interpretation of myth take on a form of expression different from the confession of faith and what it states, if the confession of sin and the confession of faith in the act of God have been transferred from the world of myth into the world of demythologizing with the aid of the existentialist interpretation? Can a statement such as the phrase "acting of God" be abandoned? By retaining this expression, the acting of God remains a myth. Or does the question whether the acting of God is a myth depend on whether it is given an existentialist interpretation or not? If so, then it does not depend on the way it is conceived or expressed, and the expression "acting of God" may in no way be given up. The acting of God could then be considered in the real sense as a salvation event that is a historical fact. Bultmann himself says in the above quotation that "the act of redemption is an historical event wrought out in time and space." In this case a historical event would simply have occurred as a "making the other-worldly this-worldly." But then, the fact and the statement about this fact could hardly be considered apart from each other. If the acting of God takes place as an event in time and space, can it be expressed without using this-worldly terms? Is there not an inescapable need for mythical terms? That would bring us right back to the criticism of those theologians and philosophers described above, and the question of how myth can be overcome and how it can be endowed with new meaning would remain ambiguous and unanswered.

In moving back and forth between the two opposing approaches to

the problem of myth, it seems as though we have come to something like a stalemate in Christian theology. The complexity of this stalemate underlies Christianity from its beginnings and throughout its entire history. Bultmann's daring approach to the problem touches this stalemate at the core and has brought it to light. It is only natural that the Christian churches and theologians should perceive in it an impending danger and that a heated debate should ensue. When the act of God, sin, and God, are included in the myth problem, it is no longer possible to avoid this stalemate as long the debate stays within the present bounds.

The question we have discussed here is essentially the old problem of the conflict that exists between the standpoint of religious faith and that of philosophy. This has become apparent in Bultmann's existentialist interpretation. But we must now ask what standpoint do we need to take in order to fully emancipate the essence of myth in the religious framework?

#### IV

I would now like to present my own view on the problem of myth. My position will no doubt go beyond the framework of the conventional views of "orthodox" Christianity, but I believe it provides the only possibility of finding a religious solution for the problem of myth. To develop my position, I will cite the example of the one Christian dogma that most bears the character of the "mythological," namely the notion of the immaculate conception as it relates to the birth of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

It is safe to assume that in antiquity the immaculate conception of Christ was naively believed as a literal fact. But it is clear that the modern man and woman are no longer able to believe it as a fact in the usual sense of the word. I still remember how several years ago an American pastor attracted vehement criticism from the general public when he claimed that the virgin birth must be believed as a literal fact. Even many of those people who believe a series of other facts about sal-

<sup>1</sup> By "immaculate conception," the author means the conception of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, i.e., the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. The dogma of the *immaculata conceptio* proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854 refers to the immaculate conception of Mary in the womb of her mother, St. Anne.

vation like the "Incarnation" as actual historical events are critical of the immaculate conception, or at least remain silent in the debate. The same tendency can also be seen among theologians. But since the doctrine of the immaculate conception maintains that God became human in Jesus, we are dealing here with the incarnation of *God*. We must therefore keep in mind that the conception resulting in Mary's pregnancy was different from every ordinary conception. The idea of conception through the Holy Spirit is simply taken for granted here, otherwise the term "Son of God" could not have come into use. As a result, both notions, the Incarnation and the virginal conception, are inextricably connected. One conditions the other, for if we accept one notion, we must take the other as well. Because the Incarnation of God is a fundamental and essential part of the Christian faith, the immaculate conception must necessarily be connected to it. But what happens when an immaculate conception is proved impossible by modern science?

Theologians today seem to answer this question by bringing in two completely different notions of "fact." As they would say, if the assertion that God has entered into bodily existence is accepted and treated as a fact in the usual sense, it can only be considered as an absurd impossibility. The normal human intellect (and science) is constituted in such a way that it can comprehend only those events whose ground and causes lie in the nature of this world alone. Now the Incarnation describes an event whereby an absolutely transcendent reality breaks into our world. As such an event, it is a historical fact, a fact of the revelation of God made possible through God's initiative. But this fact—that it is a fact and is therefore the sense of what is here called fact—opens itself only in faith. As the saying goes, "*Credo quia absurdum*." Behind the dimensions in which we deal with what we call "facts," there lies another completely different dimension. It is in the background of "world" history that the horizon of salvation history, which encompasses world history, is formed. To say that the Incarnation is a historical fact means that it is a fact grounded and originating in this dimension. This, in general, is how theologians today seem to approach the problem. In trying to understand their categories of thought, we must consider the immaculate conception to be a historical fact in this same sense.

But this entails establishing as true fact an event that contradicts circumstances accepted as true by modern science, and we now have two

different statements about one and the same event. In the late Middle Ages there appeared the doctrine of the "double truth." What we have just described above is a new kind of "double truth." But if there can be two different ways of looking at one and the same process, then the "secular" (scientific) viewpoint must be given exactly the same consideration as the theological viewpoint. Along with the theological idea of the Incarnation of God and the immaculate conception one must also accept the other idea, i.e., that Jesus came into the world through the sexual intercourse of his father and mother: the idea of his "not-immaculate" conception. Only then would any attempt to solve this problem achieve its full import. But theologians do not seem to be prepared to draw this conclusion. While claiming that the faith-reality which they teach cannot be grasped in its substance by the natural intellect and its sciences, they are not willing to accept the birth of Jesus through a *human* father and from a non-virginal mother. However consistently the facts of faith are treated, this position now becomes inconsistent, because it ignores the standpoint which the opposing party, standing on the basis of science, accepts and must accept.

The upshot of all this is that not only scientists, but also the general public influenced by science, consider all matters of belief presented by theologians as pure superstition. A philosopher might recognize the "outpouring of the Holy Spirit" as the "spiritual" renewal of an individual, but the virginal conception through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit can be nothing but pure myth. In a word, the two standpoints cannot coexist as simply as the theologians might think. No matter how much one might talk of overcoming the myth, of giving it a new meaning, it is impossible to dismiss the fact that the standpoints of faith and science are mutually exclusive. Should traditions like the virgin birth be described and dismissed as simple superstition? Or should the "spiritual" renewal be recognized, but the conception through the Holy Spirit be eliminated as myth? Because the content of the myth declares that from birth, from the very beginning of his life, a man was born infused by the Spirit, the myth describes more than a simple "spiritual" renewal. Is there no way to give the myth new meaning?

There is a way, but only if the conception resulting from sexual relations according to the viewpoint of present day science *and* immaculate conception are recognized as two absolutely contradictory but coter-

## A BUDDHIST VOICE

minous incidents. The woman who has conceived and has thus lost her virginity, must *at the same time* remain a virgin. If we understand this as the new "meaning" of the myth, in every "maculate," or "stained," woman there would always be a final dimension that is wiped of each and every stain. It is therefore unacceptable to split body and spirit into two parts and to understand the whole in a spiritual way whereby the woman "stained" in the physiological sphere is unstained in the spiritual sphere. In the problem of the virgin birth we are dealing with the locus of the physiological-natural, and not the spiritual. The phenomenon that we define and attempt to understand with the word "staining" must be seen from the unity and the whole that each human being is before it is split into the two spheres of the natural and the spiritual. This staining must be understood from the ground in which every woman is a whole and self-contained human being. The circumstance that the woman, however stained she may be, is at the same time unstained, thus belongs to that final dimension indicated above. When the whole is divided into the two spheres of the natural and the spiritual, various distinctions can be made. For example, a person impure in the area of the physiological-natural can be pure in the area of the spiritual; a person can be impure in both areas or pure in both areas; or a person can be pure in the area of the physiological-natural, but impure in the spiritual. But we are discussing a purity that lies in the original nature of the person prior to all those distinctions, a purity of absolute "non-differentiation." We are dealing with the absolute purity present in the essence of human being in face of all natural purity and impurity, all spiritual purity and impurity. A man or woman may lose his or her purity in the corporeal and in the spiritual areas, but he or she still possesses that original *Puritas*.

Our discussion here has obviously transcended the dimensions of the natural and the spiritual. Yet it is impossible for us to imagine something in ourselves which, isolated from the natural and the spiritual, exists separately for itself. The absolutely unstainable part (of the person) does indeed completely transcend the unstained or stained corporeal-spiritual being, but in no way does it separate itself from this being. It is something entirely different from this being, but it is not an entirely different "something." The absolutely unstainable and the corporeal-spiritual being are two and at the same time entirely one; entirely one and yet at the same time two. We will discuss this ap-

parent play on words in what follows. The transcendent, or what we have just called the absolutely unstainable, is in any case in no way to be conceived of as transcendental in the sense of the "one" in which the corporeal and the spiritual come to an end or from which they emanate. When we limit our considerations to the corporeal-physiological, (the virgin birth is, after all, primarily a physiological problem), we must not forget that we can conceive of the occurrence of physiological processes only as something inseparable from that fundamental unity in the nature of the whole human being. The attempt can always be made to consider both being-stained and being-unstained as a physiological phenomenon from the viewpoint of that original essence of human Dasein.

The problem of staining or unstainedness, however, is not only a question of being "dirty" or "clean" in a physiological sense. It is also a problem of the mind or spirit involved in all physical-chemical and physiological processes, and thus in an extended sense, it is also a moral problem. We are dealing here with natural processes reflected on the horizon of the spiritual. A concrete man or woman has this depth and as a result, is whole. From the perspective of the concrete individual, trying to comprehend the physiological as purely "physiological" is to understand the person in only *one* aspect. This can be done only by means of an abstraction. The viewpoint of the "scientific" man or woman we described above is a result of an insufficient reflection on the nature of his or her own standpoint. This lack of reflection is often found among intellectuals (especially Japanese intellectuals!). Some time ago, Dr. Butenandt, the German biochemist and Nobel Prize winner, gave a series of lectures in various parts of Japan. Throughout these lectures, we can detect signs of a serious reflection on the character of the scientific viewpoint combined with an almost philosophical spirituality. For example, in one lecture Dr. Butenandt states, "In answering such questions, we believe we are contributing something substantial to the knowledge of life. Yet we remain conscious of the fact that in this entire process we are able to comprehend only one segment, and not the entire reality of life. This is due to the choice of methodology and holds true for every methodology. In defining life as a chemical action, there is always present an abstraction inherent in every inquiry in the natural sciences. Of course, this picture no longer contains any spiritual characteristics, sensation, feeling, will,

or any of the values of personality associated with an individual life. If we wish to comprehend the entire reality of life, or the manifestations of life in its totality, the only course open to us is to integrate the individual results that the various methods of the natural and human sciences can offer us." In his conclusion to the lecture, Dr. Butenandt remarks that this work must be carried out with "awe before the mysteries of nature."

All these reflections are quite philosophical. But what is important here is that behind the extensive knowledge and the theoretical depth manifest in the reflections of this intellectual we can detect *one and the same* source. It is this source that has inspired those philosophical self-reflections. Visible here is the strength of the European tradition in which science and philosophy are bound together.

From the viewpoint of science it may be true that physical-chemical or physiological processes per se occurring in nature have nothing to do with "staining." Yet this discovery is an abstraction. Staining or unstainedness emerge as problems on a horizon in which natural processes are seen in unity with other "spiritual characteristics, like sensory perception, feeling, will, or all values of the personality," in a horizon in which the existence of a concrete human man or woman is considered as a united whole. The locus of this problem, insofar as it is a theoretical one, is not in science but in philosophy or "philosophical anthropology." But what consequences can be drawn if we assume in the fundamental nature of human existence an unlimited and simple immaculateness that transcends both what is stained and what is unstained (in the body and spirit), and if we must therefore assume that a man or woman can only be comprehended in his or her true concrete wholeness when he or she is seen as a being that bears such a fundamental nature in itself? If we think along these lines, we can see the simple and absolute unstainedness in "one-ness" with the stained or unstained body or in "one-ness" with the stained or unstained spirit.

Until now this has been treated only as an hypothesis, although the previous explanations were only a theoretical consequence of the discussion of the virgin birth. But is it really possible to present more than a mere hypothesis here? Is it mere wishful thinking to imagine a dimension of the absolute unstainedness in the essential ground of human existence—and in unity with this existence? Actually, this approach, which produces the true self-knowledge of a man or woman in the ex-



istential return to this dimension and opens up this dimension by means of a breakthrough along the path of existential self-knowledge, runs like a broad current through the history of the human race. This is the approach and attitude of that religion which teaches salvation (as a means of liberation) through self-knowledge, namely, Buddhism. It is also clear that various attempts have been made along these same lines in ancient western history as well. What we have described above is therefore no mere fantasy, but an approach to the interpretation of the religious man or woman that was already widespread in antiquity among certain distinctly religious viewpoints, as opposed to scientific and philosophical viewpoints.

This approach which focuses on unstainedness as such in inseparable unity with stainedness (or rather, both as one and the same) can also be applied to the facts of conception and birth. Conception and birth are indeed facts in the act of staining. Purity per se occurs in the act of staining, not next to it or beyond it, but as one and the same thing. In the words of the philosopher Nishida, this can be expressed as "absolute paradox (self-identity of absolute contradictories)." Of course, such a manner of speaking makes it impossible to think of anything other than a physiological fact. What is meant here is the well-known, real fact of physiology. Only here the fact is viewed in a different way than in science. Science sees the fact of purity per se only as an abstract fact.

My approach is different not only from the normal way of observing things in everyday life, but also from the way in which ethics, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines see the fact of stainedness. These disciplines see *only* the fact of staining itself. But none of these viewpoints can be described as a concrete viewpoint. All facts—let us first simply think of a natural-physiological fact—contain a certain aspect that cannot be exhausted from those viewpoints. This aspect only becomes visible in that horizon on which both staining and unstainableness are ordered and in which they always exist as a whole. The mutually contradictory tendencies are one and the same. In this horizon, conception and birth are each a fact of stainedness *and* unstainedness. If we wish to express this unstainedness, this *Puritas*, in a mythological way, that is, if we wish to express "the other-worldly in this-worldly terms," then the only means at our disposal is an expression like the immaculate conception, or the virgin birth.

In the sense we have described here, all of us are born of a "virgin." Our physical mother was such a virgin at the time of our conception and birth, for even then, when she was no longer a virgin, she possessed in the essential ground of her being that absolute unstainable characteristic, that *pura proprietas*. In my view, if we explode and overcome the mythological concept and extract from it its new "meaning," this is the inevitable result to which we must come. Stainedness "is" absolute unstainedness by virtue of the fact that it is stainedness. As the Japanese Zen master Bankei puts it, "We are unborn precisely as corporeal-spiritual existences, by virtue of our being born from parents." Hakuin Oshō, another Zen master, says: "All living beings are originally existences of the Buddha. Both are at the same time water and ice. Without water there is no ice. Without living beings there is no Buddha." He says that we are endowed with Buddhahood or Buddha-existence precisely in our "profane" Dasein with body and soul, not separated and removed from it. This brings us to face with real, concrete human meaning. When a man or woman awakens to his or her own Buddhahood, the Buddha-existence itself awakens out of and in him or her, and he or she becomes a truly more original, more concrete human being, a "true human being," to use the expression of the Chinese Zen master Lin-chi. If such is the essence of the human being, then both the child born into the world as well as the mother bearing it are completely unstained in their very "human" stainedness.

From the standpoint of scientific objectivity, we take it for granted that a human being can be born only from human parents. From this perspective a virgin birth is pure superstition. But if all human beings, in "one-ness" with their uncleanness and all their staining, possess a characteristic unapproachable by that staining, then all scientific facts, all the facts that we see and hear in our daily experience, can also be seen as myth. For the fact that we have been born of a mother—this fact in itself—has no other sense than to show at the same time that we have all been born from a "virgin." And if we say that everyday facts are also myth in this sense, then this myth has in reality already ceased to be "myth."

In most cases, a myth describes the relationship into which a God or gods, or a transcendent encompassing being, enters with our daily world. A myth is the account of an unusual and exceptional occurrence in the categories of the usual and the everyday. Therefore, if the fact

known to be true in our everyday world that a person was born from a mother gives meaning at the same time to birth from a virgin, then the virgin birth has ceased to be a myth. This is the obverse side of the scientific fact, the existence of which science itself has not even the slightest idea. In our day and age dominated by science, I think that mythological concepts can be overcome and myth can be interpreted in a new sense only from the position and approach just explained.

V

The ideas presented in the previous section clearly go beyond the boundaries of conventional Christian faith and theology. Until the present day, Christianity has attributed virgin birth solely to Jesus. The virgin birth is a special case rooted in the divinity of Christ and occupies a privileged position as a fact. In contrast to Buddhism, according to which all living beings are endowed with Buddhahood, divinity in Christianity is proper only to Jesus. Jesus alone is in the true sense the "eternal and natural son of God." But we can no longer avoid the question whether in such a view of things the virgin birth and the Incarnation can ultimately be "demythologized." In the Christian faith, both are recognized as historical facts, as facts that took place in the realm of history. It is customary to see the uniqueness and even the religious superiority of Christianity in the fact that it is based on the historical objectivity of the Incarnation. Although there is something to these assertions, at the same time, those "facts" are irreconcilable with the modern scientific view of the world and humanity, which poses a serious and difficult problem. Is it really possible to understand those facts as historical facts even though they are essentially different from ordinary facts and are exceptional cases?

It is indeed possible to understand "being-a-fact" in a double sense, in two different dimensions. One could make a distinction between a religious and a scientific fact, between a fact concerned with the divine and a fact concerned with the secular. But in such a case, we must be aware that we are thereby establishing a kind of "double truth." A double truth is difficult to maintain, since the truth of a religious fact stands in direct contradiction to a scientific fact that one must also recognize as true. It is often argued that there is an impassable "no-man's-land" between science and religion which enables the two

disciplines to coexist peacefully. But this merely oversimplifies the matter.

Obviously, it is impossible to establish a religious fact as a fact in the same sense on the plane on which a scientific fact is established. Standard scientific procedure would never recognize the virgin birth or the walking on the water as a fact, but rather would dismiss both as completely unnatural, as pure superstition. Nor is there any satisfactory solution in the approach that a fact can be an exception because it stands on a plane transcending the category of the scientific fact and appears as a supranatural event that has broken into the world of natural (or scientific) objective facts. To express the eruption of the supranatural into our world as fact inevitably requires the terms of mythological language which makes the other-worldly into the this-worldly.

Even though the mythological concept is exploded and its sense interpreted as "truth," it will necessarily conflict with scientific truth as long as this "truth" remains the truth of a special, exceptional fact. An exceptional or special fact will always be compared to an ordinary fact just because it is special. It will always conflict with and come into opposition with the common fact. Although in its absolute transcendence an exceptional fact might forsake the everyday world, such an absolute transcendent fact nevertheless remains relative to and stands in relation with that which it transcends. To that extent it is still not absolutely transcendent in the true sense of the word. The "supernatural" is supernatural precisely in its relation with nature. It is possible to imagine a field, an area, in which and on which all things must be placed that exist in some relation with each other and which therefore are to be thought of together. We can conceive of an area where this relation exists, even where the supernatural, the absolute transcendent, the "wholly other" (that which supposedly tolerates no relation with the creature) exists. That "which tolerates no relation with creatures" always has a kind of relation with these creatures, with the non-transcendent. If we can conceive of two supposedly contradictory things like a religious truth in its supernatural quality *and* a scientific truth in the same field and in the same area (despite the contradiction), then we cannot escape affirming the one and denying the other. The contradiction demands an "either-or" decision.

Perhaps this discussion seems too formal or even trivial. But let us consider the fact that our faculty of thought enables us to comprehend

both the "wholly other" *and* creatures together on one plane, in and on one area. This capacity of ours is nothing other than the capacity of natural reason itself, which again and again has stirred up so much commotion in matters of faith and continues to do so, as the problem of demythologizing shows.

When the possession of a divine nature and a virgin birth become facts in the life of an extraordinary human being, the contradiction between those circumstances and truth in the scientific sense necessarily demands an either-or decision. This contradiction cannot be dismissed out of hand no matter how much the mythological concepts are demythologized. Total demythologizing is impossible. This reality frustrates the whole purpose of demythologizing, which is to clear a path to the modern person.

For this reason, it is only logical if we now stress that the circumstances just mentioned may not only be maintained as statements about a special human being, but must also be conceivable as facts that make statements about *all* human beings. These facts must not blur or obliterate the characteristics of "the natural." It goes without saying that when considered from our usual understanding of nature, the virgin birth is highly unnatural or even contrary to nature. It is impossible to establish it as a fact by referring to its supernatural character. The notion of virgin birth does indeed overstep the bounds of nature as we understand it in the usual sense. But if we view transcendence only as "supernatural," then the virgin birth becomes a special case, and—as already mentioned above—the meaning that obtains through demythologizing does not escape the conflict with nature and science. We are able to think of the "supernatural" in the sense of a transcendence of nature only through so-called "vertical" transcendence. Vertical transcendence slices through nature perpendicularly, so to speak, and appears in just such a way in nature. But the counter-positioning of the vertical (the supernatural) and the horizontal (nature) is not without a certain mutual relativity between the two. This is clear from the fact that it is always possible to conceive of a single area encompassing both these lines. For ages *ratio*, or reason, has claimed to be such an area identifying both these lines in the thought process. We may call this a "metaphysical" area.

Religious truth and scientific truth must be mediated here by *ratio* in

such a way that the truths become continuous in the plane of *ratio* itself. No matter how much faith asserts its own absoluteness and rejects philosophical reason, it cannot prevent the emergence of *ratio*. For the more that faith asserts its own absoluteness and excludes reason, the more it provokes a reaction of science and invites the mediation of the philosophical *ratio*. It should now be clear that our claim to a certain kind of transcendence refers to "horizontal transcendence." In any case, it cannot be a transcendence that stands on the same plane as nature and becomes un-natural. Likewise, it cannot be a transcendence that cuts through nature vertically and appears as supernatural. It must be absolutely transcendent in the sense that it is free and detached from all possible horizontals that are present in the realm of being (however these are constituted). It need only be *horizontally* stripped of those horizontals for it to embrace both the whole plane of nature and the whole world of science as well as the above mentioned "metaphysical" area (in which the supernatural and nature can be considered together) precisely by transcending them. This horizontal transcendence forms no counterpart to nature and is therefore neither a transcendence in the relation nor a transcendence based on a mutual relationship. It must be a transcendence without any relation and contact with nature. In contrast with the standpoint of science, one may attribute to horizontal transcendence the character of total otherness. This otherness, moreover, does not entail the demand for an either-or decision vis-à-vis science. Horizontal transcendence can be conceived of without any conflict with nature.

However, since philosophy maintains the unity of nature and the supernatural (transcendence), we must be more exact: by virtue of the very fact that horizontal transcendence, in contrast to the standpoint of science, is something "wholly other," it must be a non-duality with the latter. As opposed to nature and the standpoint of science, horizontal transcendence is at the same time both absolute negation (in the sense of total otherness) and unlimited affirmation (affirmation in the sense of non-duality). It is both negative (repulsive) *and* positive (attractive) in one. On our way to horizontal transcendence we pass through the plane of nature, thereby depriving science of its claim to hegemony. From this transcendence, however, we enter once again into the plane of nature and so give back to science its true and justified position, a

position based on "nothingness." These two actions are *one* event in horizontal transcendence. It is therefore an unlimited, pure and simple Negation-Affirmation.

Let us tentatively call this "horizontal transcendence" non-nature. From this standpoint, a total demythologizing can be achieved for the first time. That is, the meaning of the mythological concepts can be extracted from the myth and interpreted in an "otherness" entirely different from scientific truth yet not conflicting with it. When we said above, in connection with our presentation on the myth of the virgin birth, that a characteristic entirely untouchable by "staining" is present in the ground of being of every man and woman, we were demonstrating this non-nature (the "not-natural" removed from the realm of the natural), this horizontal transcendence. This untouched characteristic is, of course, found not only in the essence of one particular, exceptional and extraordinary human being. The same thing can be said of all human beings and becomes in this sense a kind of nature. It becomes, as it were, nature as non-nature. This nature as non-nature, or to put in another way, this non-nature as nature, i.e., this standpoint revealing itself in the "horizontal transcendence" is the Buddhist "notion of emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) expressed in the formula: "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." I believe that a fundamental and complete demythologizing of all myths and an "existentialist" interpretation of mythological concepts are possible only in the breakthrough to the horizon of absolute "emptiness" or absolute "nothingness."

But this does not mean that the standpoint of this "emptiness" is the same as that of existential philosophy. Bultmann has taken up the existentialist hermeneutic as a methodology for demythologizing. This has also become the object of heated discussion. But the problem does not lie in the introduction of a certain philosophical method. In the background, rather, the real problem is the question of the relationship between religion and philosophy, or more fundamentally, it is a question of the relationship between religion and science. From the beginning, Hellenistic philosophy was marked by critical discussion. Already then the conflict and tension between the scientific (physical) world view and the religion of the time with its mythologoumena and its mythological world view was quite apparent. This brought the conflict between the religious and the scientific views of the world and life into



## A BUDDHIST VOICE

the open. From that time onward, throughout the long period from the end of antiquity until modern times, *ratio*, grown conscious of itself, together with the metaphysics it inspired, has provided the methodology of interpretation in religion.

The antagonism between religion and science was present as a latent problem throughout this long history, but it has become visible today in the form of a crisis. The advance of the natural sciences in the modern period since approximately the middle of the nineteenth century has given rise to a fundamental attitude of disbelief not only towards religion but also towards metaphysics. The emergence of this disbelief has plunged the European intellectual tradition into a crisis which continues to this day. Under the pressure of these circumstances, the Christian faith has attempted to deny its connection with *ratio* and to establish its own unique, if isolated, stronghold by excluding philosophy. Dialectical theology in particular has sought to open up the transcendence of faith that paradoxically contradicts reason by reducing this historical crisis to a simple crisis inherent in being human.

On the other hand, a complete indifference towards religion has made itself widespread among broad circles of human society dominated by science. Under these circumstances philosophy, too, has passed over *ratio*, which has set the tone for such a long time, and has turned towards "existence." It is therefore quite understandable that in order to face the new world view squarely, the problem of demythologizing has been proposed, not, as has been usual till now, through *ratio*, but in a more profound radicalization through "existence." But does the standpoint of "existence" offer a satisfactory approach for the hermeneutics of mythological concepts? What kind of "existence" is actually called for here? As will soon be shown, this is a problem of knowledge that extends to both religion and philosophy. It is the problem of the new knowledge that has taken the place of rational knowledge. And that brings us to the third complex of problems implied in demythologizing.

## VI

The complex of problems that I would like to treat here has been discussed by Jaspers in a work that criticizes Bultmann's methodology and also briefly alludes to Heidegger. For Jaspers, Heidegger's book

*Sein und Zeit* speaks of a basic experience of being human in which one has despaired of all belief and resolutely looks nothingness squarely in the eye. This experience takes a stance that speaks to the modern person and alludes apprehensively to being. It is thoroughly "existential" and in no way neutral and universally valid like scientific knowledge. This basic experience stands within a broad tradition that goes back to Kierkegaard, Luther, and Augustine.

At the same time, Heidegger's book, through the establishment of what he calls existentials (Existentialien) in analogy to the categories of traditional philosophy, conceives of existential philosophy as a phenomenological, objectifying analysis. In this existentialist analysis, knowledge is learnable, neutral, and can be applied to other areas. Bultmann has applied it in this way to the exegesis of the Bible. The objectifying of existence, however, leads to a scientific and universally valid knowledge. The contents taken from that high tradition have been removed and the whole now takes on an emptied gravity. In brief, for Jaspers there is a certain ambiguity in the Heideggerian philosophy. The problem is already present in the distinction between existential analysis and existential thinking. For Jaspers, what is common to the various forms of existential philosophy is found, in a negative sense, in breaking through scientific philosophy and, in a positive sense, in comprehending a gravity lacking in all mere knowledge. This common element, however, is blurred through the distinction between existentialist and existential, which leaves an opening for philosophical dishonesty. There is no such thing as an existentialist analysis; the thinking of existential philosophy is only existential thinking. (Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Frage der Entmythologisierung*, pp. 12-15.)

I agree with Jaspers' criticism. The problem is not just a conflict between a certain philosophy and a certain theology or religion. Rather, we face here a problem that is unsolvable because, on the one hand, religion in its ultimate depths conceals an area that is inaccessible for philosophy and, on the other hand, philosophy has within its very basis something inconceivable for and incomprehensible to religion. Both of them, at bottom, move along parallel to each other. In mutual intercourse and mutual interplay in the two disciplines, the understanding of man, the understanding of the world, indeed even the understanding of God are engaged, and the disciplines influence each other with their knowledge and cognition. This holds true both for the knowledge stem-

ming from the realm of reason as well as for the knowledge obtained through existence. However, this knowledge is not permitted to leave the realm of mutual intercourse and penetrate to the inner sanctum of either religion or philosophy. There is no possibility that any knowledge gained in the inner sanctum of religion and breaking through from there, could dominate philosophy and shake its essential ground. The opposite possibility is likewise unthinkable. Furthermore, a knowledge which could adopt the respective fundamental locus of each discipline, elevate it into "one locus" and then make this one locus its own dwelling, a knowledge that could join religion and philosophy in the depths of their nature, does not even come into consideration.

Religion and philosophy move along parallel to each other despite all their mutual influencing. This brings us to the realization that the fundamental loci of religion and philosophy (both disciplines indeed penetrate to the ground of the human person) are entirely separate from each other. An examination of the discussion between Jaspers and Bultmann leaves us with the deep and lasting impression that theology and philosophy contain something that prevents contact between the two. Bultmann criticizes Jaspers for not understanding that the problem of demythologizing he has presented is a problem of biblical hermeneutics. This misunderstanding comes from the fact that Jaspers considers religion to be the real relationship of a man or woman to that which he calls "transcendence." He understands myth as a symbol, as a secret code that expresses this relationship. Myth therefore is an inseparable part of religion. In his opinion, moreover, the mythical secret code can only be deciphered through new myths: myths interpret each other. All of this clearly shows that he recognizes a unique sense of myth (e.g. K. Jaspers and R. Bultmann, *Die Frage der Entmythologisierung*, p. 19). Nevertheless, for Jaspers, philosophy and religion understood in this way stand poles apart: "There is no standpoint outside of the opposition of philosophy and religion" (Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube*, pp. 60-62). He himself as philosopher confesses a "philosophical belief"!

Jaspers maintains the existence of a polarity between religion or myth and philosophy. Bultmann approaches the text of the Bible with an existentialist interpretation. The two viewpoints cross each other like two diagonal lines. They contradict each other in the same way as emphasizing a unique sense of the myth and demythologizing con-

tradict each other, or as the polarity of religion and philosophy, on the one hand, and the application of the existentialist interpretation to the Bible, on the other, contradict each other. Jaspers wants to remain within the sphere of philosophical belief, and it is therefore only too understandable that he cannot comprehend the preaching that belongs to religion by its very nature nor the demythologizing which this preaching demands.

At the same time, Jaspers sees that Bultmann advocates an orthodoxy which makes him dogmatic and illiberal. Jaspers, in contrast, takes a liberal attitude. From the horizon of his philosophical belief, belief resulting from the unreal relation to transcendence can in no way impair the free activity of reason prominent in philosophy. As Jaspers puts it: "Whoever lives in human reason can not call on any God in his struggles with others, but only on evidence in the world" (Jaspers and Bultmann, *Die Frage der Entmythologisierung*, pp. 48-49). In the realm of the philosophical belief he has described, belief is closely bound up with the openness of reason. The core of reason "is openness for an infinity of content." "In cool clarity passion works for what is open." It is an "atmosphere of reason." In order to win the pure truth, it is necessary for reason to doubt the demand (Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube*, p. 39). From these words one may conclude that the philosophical belief confessed by Jaspers remains limited to a belief without witness. At any rate, he does not include the religious witnessing associated with religious belief (the witness of a final decision that has already occurred). As long as his belief is a "philosophical" belief bound up with the openness of reason, this is only natural. It is also only natural that Jaspers shows no understanding for Bultmann's attempt to open up the possibility of an encounter with revelation for the modern person. Bultmann, in contrast, maintains the concern for religious witness. It goes without saying that he cannot accept Jasper's criticism.

Although there are some good reasons behind Jasper's criticism, he refuses to believe that revelation has occurred in the realm of history at a specific time, in a certain place, and in a certain human being. He rejects the claim of Christianity to exclusive absoluteness. "The Jesus Christ in me is not exclusively bound to that unique Jesus, and Jesus as Christ, as the God-man, is a myth. Demythologizing cannot arbitrarily stop here" (*Der philosophische Glaube*, p. 81). Christianity's claim to

the uniqueness of revelation and to absoluteness has its roots in the "vertical transcendence" described above. In orthodoxy, religious witness (which has already made a final decision and which arises from the decision) appears in the form of the uniqueness of revelation and the absoluteness of Christianity. According to Jaspers, however, this goes against the openness of reason and against the freedom of philosophizing: it gives rise to illiberalism. As long as a religion remains on the standpoint of vertical transcendence, it cannot keep reason from emerging and conflicting with it.

Ultimately, what lies behind this whole discussion is the circumstance that religion or theology, *and* philosophy move along parallel lines and do not touch. The debate therefore remains a fruitless discussion. The existentialist philosopher enters the domain of religion and affirms the significance of myth. The theologian uses the methodology of the existentialist interpretation in order to achieve a total demythologizing. But the two are diametrically opposed.

But could there not be a religious witness that combines an unconditional openness and freedom together with an absolute decision? Can there not be a knowledge that allows for "an openness to an infinity of content" not in the realm of pure reason, but in the domain of religious witness and religious *decision*? Can we not conceive of a knowledge that is not a knowledge in the sphere of reason, but much higher still, a knowledge in the sphere of religious witness? This would be a knowledge that could unite the essential ground of religion and philosophy, a knowledge as religious witness. And that brings us back to the knowledge we mentioned above, the knowledge whose essence is found in the formula "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," Buddhist *prajñāpāramitā*, the great knowledge.

TRANSLATED BY RICHARD F. SZIPPL